12-170 20395 ERMA ALFAU ORAL HISTORY – REGARDING TRENTON

Interviewer is Evelyn McClure.

EM: Erma tell me about your family.

EA: My grandfather came here in, my brother thought it was in about 1868, and they bought a section over by Trenton. It already had a house on it, but he cleared the land by importing Italian workers and making charcoal, and sending it down to San Francisco.

EM: What was your grandfather's name?

EA: Henry Castens.

EM: Where did the Italian workers come from, were up her working on agriculture or?

EA: They must have come in just about that time as immigrants. That was before agriculture. They must have been skilled and knew how to make charcoal.

EM: I read about that along the Laguna and cut all the trees.

EA: And on our place there, my mother inherited 150 acres, you could see where the charcoal pits were and the soil was dark.

EM: And that's in that Trenton area?

EA: Yes, they cleared all the land. And then about that time the train came, the branch from Fulton came up the river, and that's how they went down as far as Sausalito. Then in the summer time the people would come up form the City and go to the Russian River and Renco had cabins and it was very popular from that era.

EM: Do you know how your grandfather moved the charcoal out? Once they had made it then they had to ship it someplace.

EA: They shipped it to San Francisco by train. By that time came through, because he gave them a right a-way through his property to go up the river. The branch came. They shipped a lot of lumber out of Guerneville. It would be too far to ship to Petaluma, to take the barge down.

EM: Was there a station on your grandfather's property? What was its name?

EA: When they branched out there was Wolsey Station and there was Trenton Station. And Trenton was really a town, they had the post office and later on the telephone, a store, dance hall, bar. It was a whole town.

EM: So that's where your mother grew up?

EA: Yea, and I grew up there.

EM: Where you born in that area?

EA: Yea, on the same ranch.

EM: Who did your mother marry?

EA: She was married in about 1906 and I was born in 1909. My fathers name was Kobler, Ernest.

EM: Was he a boy would had grown up in this area too?

EA: No he was born in Switzerland, I mean born in New Jersey but his parents came from Switzerland. His father later on had a store in Wolsey. You know it was Fulton, Wolsey and then Trenton. There were a lot of station houses, not all stops of the trains had houses but a lot of them did because the mail came to the different post office all the way up there. Then later on when I went to high school, Analy didn't have a bus so we took the train into Santa Rosa and went to Santa Rosa High School. Everyday in the morning and in the evening.

EM: Was it in the same place as it is now on Mendocino Avenue? It must have been a totally different building then.

EA: The one down on Railroad Avenue, it was the same building.

EM: Your parents stayed on your grandfather's farm, what did they raise?

EA: They always had pigs, a few cows, fruit, vegetables. One year he raise cucumbers and there was a cucumber factory in Santa Rosa. And one time tomatoes, anything that they could sell. And my mother canned a whole cellar full.

EM: They had six in the family?

EA: Six children, there were five girls and my brother was the youngest.

EM: What happened to all your sisters and brother?

EA: I have one sister left all the rest are gone. They both live here. Before my father died he sold most of the land, but there were 18 acres where she still lives on the property.

That era, the train was quite popular.

EM: What did you have to pay for a train ticket to ride everyday?

EA: Five dollars a month.

EM: That was pretty expensive really?

EA: Yes, but the county reimbursed him.

EM: So you went to high school there. Do you remember any of your teachers?

EA: Miss O'Leara, she taught English.

EM: Was that your favorite subject?

EA: No, (laughing). I remember her. But I do remember Junior College had just started and there was only one building. I graduated in 1926 or 1927, the high school had just been built, it wasn't even complete. I think we had gym in the auditorium; they didn't have a gym yet. So that's been quite awhile.

One year, my older sister took journalism, so my father had a old baby grand automobile so he let her drive that in because she had to stay later. Dirt roads would sometime to clear into Santa

Rosa and wouldn't even see a car. And if we happened to need to change a tire, we'd just go to some neighbor and they'd help us.

EM: What roads were around? How did you get from your house in Trenton to the High School?

EA: Trenton Station, we took the train in. But when we went to grammar school, we went up Trenton and two miles up. It was the Vine Hill Grammar School was up near Martini Winery. We walked home on a dirt road, it was about two miles. Sometimes our father would take us on rainy days.

EM: So that was a one-room school?

EA: When I first went there it was a one-room school and even had outdoor plumbing. Then afterwards they built two rooms.

EM: Did you have one teacher?

EA: Yes, at one time. And then they had two teachers afterwards. And in order to graduate and go into high school you had to take really strict tests. And sometimes it was a farming area and some of them couldn't get back to school and there were some really big ones there.

EM: How many students were there?

EA: Maybe 25 in each room.

EM: Do you remember some of your classmate's names?

EA: Yes, Willard Libby, he went to school when I did. He got the Nobel Prize. He was a redhead and it was quite a big family, Libby. And after he went to college he helped the others. Even in school he was the brightest.

EM: Who were some others?

EA: The Shiedeckers, Elmo Martini and the Prati's, there was a big family there.

EM: So what did you do after high school?

EA: I worked in San Francisco for a while then I married then I didn't work afterward because I had children. Then after the war we lived in Redwood City and he worked in the shipyards. And afterwards we came back up here, my husband was an electrician and we built here. I bought a couple of acres from my mother and we built a house, then I sold that afterwards.

EM: What was your father's name?

EA: William Alfau.

EM: Husband was always a machinist?

EA: For a while he worked in a paint factory, then he was an electrician.

EM: So you had some children?

EA: I have two girls and I lost a boy. One lives here in Cloverdale and the other lives in Red Bluff. I see the one in Cloverdale quite often.

EM: How many grandchildren do you have?

EA: I have four grandchildren and four great grandchildren and one great great grandchild.

EM: Let's go back and talk about Trenton a little bit. Do you remember what Trenton was like when you were a young girl? Do you remember some of the people, the postmaster?

EA: Insmegars, he was the post master, they also had the store, dance hall. The store was in the same building as the post office, but the dance hall was nearby. There was another building there and a couple of houses.

EM: Who built all that?

EA: Intmegars or maybe it was Hock. Her name was Glass, Sophie Glass before. I just remember the Intamegers. There's a red barn there and still stands, but it was sold, I thinks it's a winery. And then on the other side there's a Druids Hall, that was later and at one time it was bar down below and Druids Hall was above. But they eliminated that and it's just the Druids, they built a new one.

EM: Anybody in your family a Druid?

EA: I am, I'm a member of the women's?

EM: Of the Trenton Druids?

EA: Yea

EM: What year did that start?

EA: I've been there; it's been over 50 years.

EM: What did the Druid's do?

EA: They are a lodge, and they are supposed to go out and help people if they need help. But these lodges, people kind of drop. I still belong though.

EM: I imagine they had social events.

EA: They had pot locks and you meet your old friends, the ones that are left.

EM: In the old days I guess it was pretty popular; everybody was pretty remote you had a place to centrally meet.

EA: There were a lot of Italian and they would make ravioli's and all those things. There were a lot of Italians who lived on Vine Hill Rd. because they had vineyards. Mostly Zinfandel.

EM: There was a lot of grape growing.

EA: The Lagoon was on the other side of Trenton and then the Mark West Creek run into the river, so on the other side of Mark West Creek near Mirabel were the big hop fields, all along the river. The Tippan Ranch was 500 acres and all the families in the crop picking times they would go and pick hops.

EM: Did you do that?

EA: Yea, my father was field boss but we all picked and all the families did that and it gave them some extra money. They didn't have much, the farmers, and it gave them some extra money over the winter. We got a penny a pound for picking pounds.

EM: How long did it take you to a pound?

EA: If you picked 200 pounds during the day you would be doing good, that would be $2.00. When they had all the apples, right down in Trenton because they built a packing house there. I guess I was about 14 we sorted apples and we got $.20 a hour.

When we went to high school, if we wanted clothes we had to work during the summer. We picked prunes, my father had prunes too. But we picked for the neighbors, we picked prune, we picked grapes we picked anything. It was all piece work.

EM: Were there a lot of prunes in the Trenton area?

EA: YEA: there was, then after that there were grapes. And at one time there were even cherries and berries too.

EM: How did you pick hops?

EA: You had to wear gloves and there were vines and you pulled them down and you stripped the hops off. They didn't want all the leaves. Then they would weigh them at the end of the day and you'd get the ? and at the end of the season you would get paid. Then those hops, they had hop kilns and they would dry them and bail them and ship them all over the world.

EM: Wasn't there someone around here that whose making beer?

EA: Grace Bros.

EM: Was that the only brewery around?

EA: That was the only one I knew, there must have been others but they were the biggest.

EM: That reminds me about the prohibition era. Do you have any stories about prohibition?

EA: Most of all the farmers were bootleggers. Martini, they sold it for sacramental purposes.

EM But people could make their own wine; I think they could make 200 gallons.

EA A lot made their own wine.

EM: Did any of your family make their own?

EA: We didn't make wine much, because we didn't have much alcohol around. Maybe some brandy way high up on the shelf. But the Italians served wine with their meals, but we didn't do that.

EM: What about the Druids meetings, did they bring wine?

EA: Sometimes they did.

EM: You rode the Northwestern Pacific Railroad, did you ever ride the P&SR electric railroad.

EA One or twice, but most of the time we rode the other train because it was just down the hill. We would just have to hop over a fence and we were there at the station.

EM: How often did the train run?

EA: Everyday. The passenger train would go down in the morning, it would leave about 8:00 and then it would come back at 4:00. But the freight trains ran at various times.

EM: Did you ever take the train to the Russian River?

EA Yes, but not very often because we were so near Mirabel. I don't know what time it was, but they had big bands up the river and dance halls. We didn't go up there very much. At that time I think I was married so I didn't go, but my sisters did.

EM: Are you the oldest in your family of your sisters?

EA: I had one older sister, I was second.
We always had enough food and clothes, but you never had much money.

EM: Did you work in the garden with your mother?

EA: My older sister didn't like to work outside, so I and my younger sister elected to work outdoors. We worked almost like boys. Worked on the hay bailer, pitched hay, did everything to help on the farm.

EM: You had pigs, what did you feed the pigs?

EA My father had a small separator and he would separate the milk and send the cream down to Petaluma on the train. So the pigs had grain and any vegetables left over. Sometimes he would raise extra pumpkins. We had banana squash all winter and the pigs had pumpkins.

One time along the railroad and partly on our place, the real wild blackberries, the ones that Burbank couldn't cultivate, we got buckets full. My mother canned as much as forty quarts of wild blackberries. And they had the best flavor. Now they are eliminated, the Himalayas came in and there aren't any more wild blackberries.

EM: There are wild blackberries growing everywhere, but they are different kids.

EA These had the littlest bit of one and had the best flavor with the little seeds. They were the original ones. But when the Himalayas came in they crowded out all the wild blackberries.

EM: Do you think that's Burbank's fault?

EA: Yea, he brought the Himalayas' here.

EM: It's like mistletoe, it's from him and it's everywhere.

EA: And the wild blackberries had the smaller thorns and it was easier to pick.

EM: Did she make jam or jellies?

EA: She made some, but she just canned them and then later on she would make pies or we would just eat them from the jar. They needed very little sugar because they were so sweet.

EM: Did you learn to cook?

EA: I had to learn later, because I did more outdoor work.

EM: So you weren't that excited about cooking?

EA: I liked to but, I do now I don't mind cooking.

EM: How did you meet your husband?

EA: Well he worked in the same place I did, I worked in the office and he worked. It was a Fuller Paint in South San Francisco.

Then we went through depression, it was so hard in San Francisco, about 30% of the people kept their job.

I don't think he worked full time, he worked part time.

Everything was so cheap then, it's not like now if they had a real depression everything is so expensive. Those days you could get a loaf of bread for a dime.

EM: By that time you had children?

EA: I had my first son, which I lost when two years old with spinal meningitis. Then I have the two girls.

EM: So WWII came along

EA: Almost everybody worked in the ship yards. But I didn't work, all the other women did and my children were small and my husband said you're not going to let the children run the streets like some of them did. There were that many baby sitters then.

EM: Well the women went to work; we needed them in the factories.

Where were you living in WWII?

EA: In Redwood City, then we sold it and came back up here. I had a place. When my husband died, I had - from my sister I caught TB, she worked in a __?__ so later on I caught it and I couldn't work after that.

EM: So how did you get cured?

EA: They cut me from here to here and took part of my lung out and then gave me streptomycin for five years besides. Streptomycin had just come out then.

EM: They took part of your lung out? Was that a common thing to cure Tuberculosis?

EA: At that time they did. And they cut and took a rib out and cut it. That was in the 1960's.

But still they make mistakes too. It's remarkable; I knew I had been exposed to. You remember how they had those small x-ray machines and they would come out to different areas and I would take one once a year. And then they noticed a change, so they caught that before I was ever positive I couldn't give it to anybody. But still I had a hole in my lung.

EM: But you didn't have any symptoms?

EA: I had no symptoms, I wasn't coughing but there was a shadow on my lung. So they went in for an exploratory, they thought it was a tumor but found a hole.

EM: Where did you have that done?

EA: In Santa Rosa. It took it awhile to get over that, over a year. So it's a wonder I survived this far.

EM: And here you are, 95.

EA: Almost 95, I'll be 95 in November.

EM: How did your grandfather end up in California?

EA: He came from Germany and first he went to Nevada. My mother said he rode horseback. So I imagine he came on horseback. He must have had some money to buy, but I guess it was $.10 an acre. There was already a house and stood the earthquake in 1906. I remember that house; it wasn't on foundation, just on redwood blocks. It rocked back and forth but it didn't fall. It was a two-story house, all redwood.

EM Do you think he was doing silver mining there?

EA: He had sheep, so I don't know. He must have brought some sheep here.

EM: He's the only one in his family that came from Germany?

EA: Yea, he was the oldest and he was about to go into the draft and he didn't want to go into the Army. So he left.

My mother was born in 1880. His first wife died, they had one daughter and they both died young. They were in the cemetery in Healdsburg. And then later on in Forestville he had a plot there.

EM: A second family. So he got married over here?

EA: No he was married here to both of them. My grandmother, she was a widow, she had two sons and she lived in San Francisco. My grandfather had relatives in San Francisco.

EM: So that's how they met. He had a daughter.

EA: Yea. He had a daughter but she died somehow. And they were buried up in Healdsburg. Then he bought the big plot here, he was buried and my mother was too in Forestville.

A little way from, we could walk down there. There was catfish, and there was French frogs.

EM: Did you go fishing?

EA: Then in Mark West there were little fish and we would go down. That was before the sewer came. Everything was fresh here.

EM: They would stock fish, I read in 1899 they were stocking fish and then they would multiply.

EA The catfish were so good and so many French frogs one of the neighbors came over because we had so many legs.

EM Did you ever go boating? Did people go boating?

EA On the river, but not that much in the creek. But the Mark West Creek that ran through our place we would wade in there. Cause the water was clear.

EM How deep was it?

EA: In the summer it wasn't very deep, but Mirabel when we went swimming there my mother had to go because it was..... you could see the bottom it was clear all the time. Then when it got polluted it wasn't very clear.

EM: What happened there? Was it Sebastopol's collection?

EA: It was from Santa Rosa. Did Sebastopol go over there too?

EM: Well Sebastopol had sewer ponds that were kind of by the Laguna area there. That's where they collected it there and a lot of it got thrown in the Laguna up to the 1920's or so.

Supposedly in the 1920's or earlier, there were resorts and you could got boating on the Laguna.

EA: Yes, they had summer homes, it was a popular place. People came up from San Francisco because in the summer it was cold. They would go swimming.

EM: Was Guerneville built up, were there a lot of cottages?

EA: Yes, a lot of cottages. And they would rent cottages or buildings where they would rent for a month for room and board. My sister she had a friend that lived in Monte Rio and her Aunt had this boarding house in the summer, and she would wait on tables. It was a nice place for families.

My mother said she had a half brother and the train would come up to the stations slow and these tourists, men had these straw hats and they would stick their head out the window. And her brother would have a stick and knock their hats off and have a hat.

EM: There must have been a lot of people going up there?

EA: There was, they had lots of dances and they had entertainment up there. Of course swimming, they would swim every day.

EM: At Mirabel was it a regular swimming hole?

EA: It was a place, it was all marked off and up above there was this big dance hall, later. One time, on Sunday you could bring a picnic. It was a family day, Mirabel was kind of a family.

EM: Mark West Creek that went through your property wasn't big enough to put a boat on but you could wade.

EA: No, but in the wintertime on the low lands it would flood. Because when the river got too high it would flood. On Fulton Rd. and the left hand side where they have all those nice houses now, when it flooded that would back up and go in there and then the river wouldn't flood so high. Then they went and put sewage in there and drained it all out and built homes on there. It used to be a natural place for the water to go.

EM They changed the pattern of the water flow. When it rains too heavy it goes everywhere.

EA: When it rained too much you couldn't go on Fulton Rd. because it would flood.

EM I don't think I've seen it flood there in the last 10 years. It's funny you don't notice the Laguna until it floods and then you do know it's there. It's a huge area.

EA: Part of the Laguna, down near Trenton. Indian used to come there and get things for their baskets to make. Some of the Webas used to live up there on the hill. There were some really good basket weavers there.

EM The Pomo's

EA: They would get some of their material from there.

EM Did the Indians stay there and work on that ranch?

EA: Yes, it was a big ranch, 500 acres. They had grapes, then berries, then they had apples and now it's sold and they have horses on that.

EM Where was that?

EA: It was more up on Vine Hill. It came clear over to Forestville. It was a great big ranch.

EM: Wasn't that (Hill) a big company?

EA: Well they were wealthy; they had that nice home up there.

What was the name of the apple place there in Graton?

EM: Manzana, Walkers, Oehlman, Hallberg?

EA: Hallberg, one of the brothers owned that big ranch.
They had a lot of workers and they had houses so they just stayed there. They called it the Hill Ranch, but Hallberg owned it. Then they sold it to Biff's Company, it's more of a company that has horses, race horses I think. It was one of the biggest ranches and hired a lot of people. They had a lot of hand labor. I can remember when my father plowed with a plow and a horse.

EM: In summer when they started processing apples there were a lot of people that came in. Did they come from San Francisco or are these migrant workers.

EA: They were local people.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO BEGINS.....

EM: I guess through the 20's 30's and 1940's when the apples were big.

EA: The Gravensteins, at one time they shipped them all over you know. And then they had canneries after. They shipped them clear to New York they had the trains with iced refrigerated cars and sometime they made money and sometime they didn't

EM: They were hard to ship.

EA: Yea, because they don't last long.

EM: And sometimes they would pick them too early.

EA: One of the first growers up here was Griffith. Alice Griffith was a friend of our family. That was the daughter. She was the one who did a lot in that park.

EM: You have to tell me about the Griffith family because I've been interested in them.

EA: There were three daughters, one was a poet and she was published. The other was an artist and then Alice was a naturalist. She would plant seeds along the road, she was ahead of her time. She was a great friend of my family. We used to go up there and picnic. We would spend a lot of time up at Griffith's Park. It was man made you know. Mr. Griffith planted the redwood and different trees; there was a natural spring there. And Alice made a theater there and made ponds. She worked hard on that, sometimes she would get in and work just like a man.

EM: Was Mr. Griffith alive when you were a kid?

EA: Yes, I remember him. When we went to school and saw a car, there weren't that many cars. He had a Stanley Steamer and they wore kind of a duster and he would go put-put down the road. We were fascinated by that Stanley Steamer. He was one of the first apple growers.

EM: Did any of the daughters get to drive the car?

EA: I don't remember any.

EM: She was one of the daughters who married later in life?

EA: She went with this man and he married someone else and after she died he married Alice. But I don't know if they ever lived together. Because he was older, but they did marry. There was one son, he was a great friend of my father, and he committed suicide. Out on the ranch.

EM: You I never hear about a son, it's only the daughters.

EA: He was Guy Griffith. They never talked about it much.

EM: So what did Alice do besides developing that park?

EA: She worked a great deal on that park and she tried to landscape the highways. She was a head of her time as a naturalist.

I don't think there was too much money later on or not. Because the apple (industry) were so bad. I don't know if they charge much in that park or not.

EM: So Alice stayed living in the family property when her parents died?

EA Yes, she lived. Then it went to a nephew. There were two other sisters but maybe they weren't living by then.

EM: Now the lady who was a poet lived in Kenwood. And lived there most her life. Who was the other daughter, the painter? Grace.

EM: Then there was Nathaniel Griffiths sister, Laura Huffhine. She was very interesting too and interested in astronomy and botany. Maybe that's where Alice got in the planting and gardening. A very interesting family.

EA: Alice was a very nice looking person. She told a story one time. She always wanted a Panama hat. She was driving and along the road was a Panama hat, so she got one.

EM: Stanley Steamers. Did you family have cars in the early days? What kind of cars did they have?

EA: We had a Baby Grand Chevy, it was a big one that had running boards. We never had new cards because we couldn't afford. And then we had, I don't know what it was but it had running boards and icing windows and leather seats. They were windy and cold.

EM: That pretty cool you new the Griffith family.

EA: Near by there was the Winkler's, Jeff Winkler. Jeff had a big apple ranch right near the Griffith ranch. Then on the other side was the Martini's with the winery.

EM: The Griffith ranch was on Laguna road?

EA: Yea and it's in the back where the park is now.

EM: There's a lot of trees around and I can never identify where it is.

EA: It's hard to find the entrance there.

EM: I did talk to the nephew, Ned Coons, trying to find someone to give me an oral history like this. I guess Gaye LaBarron has recorded them.

EA: On the other side of the Griffiths were Ted ? Shiedecker. When people had ranches they generally stayed, they just didn't move around.

EM: Yea, and then the next generation took over.

END OF RECORDING